

## You will love again (the stranger who was your self) by fandammit

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**Summary:**

Most nights are quiet, filled with hot meals and soft music and homework to review. Some are loud and headache-inducing; dinners that are filled with too many screaming, laughing, fighting kids and a mismatching set of menu items -- a perfect casserole from Nancy, slightly undercooked pasta from Will and Joyce, store bought cake from Steve.

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Jim Hopper celebrates two very different winters.

From the [Tumblr](#) prompt: Flashback to the first time Hopper and Joyce meet after he settles back in Hawkins following her daughter's death, and the flashback is linked to a situation happening in the present time.

# You will love again (the stranger who was your self)

## Author's Note:

Title taken from "Love after Love" by Derek Walcott.

Makes frequent reference to my "Thursday Night Dinner at the Byers" headcanon which I explained [here on my tumblr](#)

Hawkins is the same as always, even if he isn't.

He spends his days wandering the same tidy streets of his youth, driving down the same quiet country roads; spends his nights chasing drink after drink in the same bars he used to walk past as a kid.

There's that same ache in his chest he always felt when he lived here before.

But that ache had been a vague, dull kind of pain that had pushed him to leave, to go, to run as far and as fast as he could once he turned 18.

This ache is different.

It expands from the center of his chest, ripped and cavernous, a throbbing sort of pain that never dulls, never fades, no matter how many whiskey bottles he goes through.

He wonders if it will kill him. Wonders, on those empty, lonely nights when the pain of loss cuts jagged across his heart, why it's taking so long.

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It's winter in Hawkins.

Snow falls steadily in the morning, leaving sheets of white across Hawkins' quiet neighborhoods.

He tries not to look at the huge drifts of snow, because looking at them will remind them of Sarah. Her red snow coat that she couldn't

wait to wear, the sound of her laughter as she crunched her new boots in the snow, the feel of her hand in his as she warmed her frozen fingers.

He curses at himself for deciding to walk to the liquor store rather than drive. There are snowmen and snow angels everywhere, and he thinks that his chest might collapse every time he walks past one.

He's walking quickly past the park, almost jogging, when he hears it.

Laughter, bright and sparkling in the cold afternoon air. The high tones settle against him, spark at some memory he thought he'd forgotten.

He looks past the chain link fence beside him, out into the playground in the middle of the park. Sees a young boy smoothing down the sides of snowman, an older boy - barely in his teens - who looks similar enough that he must be his brother surveying the work like a doting father. He pinpoints the source of the laughter.

Joyce.

She turns and looks at him from across the field, and he's close enough to see the moment she makes up her mind to come over and talk to him.

It startles him. Being seen.

His grief is a cloak, is a curse. His loss renders him invisible. His pain makes him untouchable.

His sorrow has made him a ghost.

He catches Joyce's stare with a flat look of his own. It's a look that says no, that says not today, not ever. It's a look from adolescence, honed from years on the police force, perfected by a thousand moments of anger.

It works on everyone else.

It doesn't work on Joyce.

It shouldn't surprise him -- Joyce never cared about that look. Not when they were kids and stood side by side at the same height; not when they were teenagers and his tall frame dwarfed her smaller size.

She stands on the other side of the fence, hands to her side, a cigarette dangling between her fingers. She doesn't give him an awkward smile, doesn't use a special voice the way everyone else does. She just looks at him with a mix of warmth and sadness, and for some reason it doesn't make him angry.

"Hey, Hop," she says quietly, the nickname dropping from her mouth like it hasn't been 20 years since she's used it.

He gives her a long stare. Considers just walking away, the way he's done to countless other people in this town.

"Joyce," he hears himself say instead, his voice rough and gritty with disuse. He tries to think of the last time he talked to someone. Realizes he doesn't know.

There's a shriek of laughter behind her and they both glance back towards the playground. The boy - the smaller one - is sitting in the snow, gripping his sides as he laughs; the older one is brushing snow from his hair, a crooked smile on his face.

It makes his throat constrict. There's a ringing in his ears as he reaches out and grips the metal bar of the fence, pushes a question out through gritted teeth as he tries not to think of red winter coats and fine blond hair.

"The younger one is Will - he just turned ten," Joyce is saying, shocking him back to the moment, alerting him to the question he hadn't planned on asking. "Jonathan is thirteen." She glances over at him, at the way he's clutching at the railing.

He nods curtly but doesn't say anything. He wants to move, to walk away, but he doesn't trust his legs to hold him steady. He looks at the two boys, the way that Jonathan is helping Will stack the final rolled ball of snow atop their snowman, how he rests his hand gently on Will's shoulder to survey their work, how Will leans into him and

snakes his arm around the older boy's waist.

It draws him painfully back to Sarah's last winter before she got sick. The seriousness with which she had approached snowman building, the way she had insisted on making it a snowlady rather than a snowman. Something cracks in him and he knows that Joyce must see it.

He swallows thickly, clenches his jaw to distract from the burning behind his eyes.

He nods at Joyce, who's looking at him with a mix of sympathy and sadness that makes him angry even as it lessens the tightness in his throat. Glances over at the boys, at a life he had once and lost, at a past he both wants to escape and to preserve, and walks the other way.

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Hawkins looks the same as always, even though he knows it isn't.

He spends his days chasing after lost dogs and talking to irate neighbors, spends each case trying to figure out if there's something hidden, something nefarious underneath the banality of it all.

His nights are different now -- no longer lonely, tiresome things filled with too much booze and too little human contact. Instead, he rushes home every night, tries to make it before 5:30, calls if he'll be later than 6:00.

Most nights are quiet, filled with hot meals and soft music and homework to review. Some are loud and headache-inducing; dinners that are filled with too many screaming, laughing, fighting kids and a mismatching set of menu items -- a perfect casserole from Nancy, slightly undercooked pasta from Will and Joyce, store bought cake from Steve.

There's a different feeling in his chest, now. It's not an ache, though it nestles in the center of his chest in the same way, burrows into his heart the same way that hurt used to.

Not love, though it's that, too. Not happiness, though he could call it

by that and be telling the truth.

He looks at Eleven's thick, brown curls, long enough that it's at her shoulders. Looks at the way she smiles at the utter pandemonium at the dinner table, the way Joyce reaches out to her with a soft smile and soft touch. Thinks about that feeling in his chest -- how expansive it feels, how little he feels like he deserves it.

Contentment, he thinks, the word blanketing him the same way that grief used to.

He wonders when that happened. Wonders, in the middle of the barely contained chaos they call Thursday night dinner, how he ever thought just surviving could be enough.

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There's snow on the ground, six years from his first winter here.

The front yard of the Byers house is blanketed with it , rising up in huge drifts, making the world seem cleaner and crisper than it ever really is.

It would be peaceful, if not for the loud shouts and peals of laughter ringing out through the air, the crunch of nine different pairs of boots running around the yard.

The snowman competition had been Nancy's idea, a way to let out everyone's energy after a string of blizzardy days. He hadn't been sure how much it would take out of them, really, but he has to admit that he also didn't realize they'd all take the competition as seriously as they seem to be doing.

He hopes this means dinner tonight will be less of a stampede and more of an actual shared meal, but he's not counting on it.

He brushes his fingers over the three handmade ribbons in jacket pocket, pushed furtively into his hands by Nancy as soon as she and Mike had pulled up to the house.

*("What do we need three prizes for?" He asks, puzzling over the three intricately crafted ribbons in his hand.*

*Nancy waits for the rest of the group to clamber into the house, Dustin yelling a string of curse words as he stubs his toe on the top step.*

*"I think everyone should get a prize, don't you? The kids have all been planning their snowmen for weeks."*

*He stares at her, raises a skeptical brow.*

*"Everyone getting first prize kind of defeats the purpose of a prize, doesn't it?"*

*"They're not all getting first prize -- look at the stitching."*

*He looks down, studies each ribbon in turn: one for 'most creative', another for 'most personality', the third, slightly more elaborate one that reads 'best overall'.*

*He motions to the one at the top of the pile.*

*"What the hell does most personality mean?"*

*She shrugs her shoulders, though there's a smile on her face as she does it.*

*"I'm pretty sure you'll know it when you see it."*

Jane, Max and Nancy are hard at work on what is, quite honestly, shaping up to be a pretty damn impressive snow woman. She's holding Max's skateboard in one hand, stick arm outstretched in front of her, a nicely braided brown wig on her head. The two younger girls are bent close to one another, shaping the body, while Nancy works intently on carving out details on their snow woman's face.

Jonathan, Will and Mike look like they're creating something that looks like one of the drawings that Will has tacked up on his bedroom wall. Jonathan is working on a pile of snow that looks vaguely like a wizard's hat, while Will and Mike work on sticking in a bunch of dried twigs that look like they're meant to be a beard.

Dustin, Lucas and Steve are...trying, which is the best word that he can really give to whatever it is they're putting together. There's a wide, flattened base that is just that, with a bunch of smaller rounded snowballs surrounding it. They spend an equal amount of time

arguing with one another as they do actually working, though it's to Steve's credit that they seem to be getting anything done at all.

"The first time I saw you again was when Jonathan and Will were building that snowman in the park," Joyce says quietly, her eyes twinkling up at him. Her hands are wrapped around a steaming mug of hot chocolate, her small frame leaning ever so slightly into his. "Do you remember?"

He nods, takes a drink of his own hot chocolate before he looks over at her.

"I think that was the first conversation I'd had with anyone after moving back." He taps his fingers absently against his mug. "I guess conversation is a bit of a stretch."

Joyce shrugs, the corner of her mouth lifting.

"You gave what you could at the time." She takes a small sip. "I understood."

He nods, holding the mug against his chest. A breeze blows in through the woods, and he steps in closer to Joyce when he feels her shiver. They're quiet for a long moment, the sounds of Steve and Dustin arguing, of Jane and Max laughing, rising up into the bright, cold afternoon.

"I haven't made a snowman since Sarah died," he says after a long moment, his voice faltering over the syllables of her name. "She had this new red coat -- those little, um, poms attached to the zippers, with a white stripe up the arms." He blows out a breath. "God, she loved that coat."

He sets down his mug on the railing in front of him to hide the tremor in his hands that he knows has nothing to do with the cold.

"I must've spent hours on that thing. She tried so hard to help me - you know how kids are. I'd roll up a snowball and she'd pat loose snow into the sides, and half of it would just fall back down onto the ground." He huffs out a laugh, though it hurts his throat to do it.

He doesn't know why he's telling Joyce this. It's not like she asked.



It's not like she's ever asked, ever pried into that part of his life. All he knows is that now that he's started, something in him doesn't want him to stop. "It ended up so lopsided, but it didn't matter to her. She had all these pretty little rocks and beads and shells that she'd been collecting from God knows where, all tucked away in the pockets of her jacket. I just stood there and held her up as she decorated our snow lady with them." He smiles at the memory. "It was - ," he sniffs and laughs softly, and this time it doesn't hurt so badly. "It was really fucking hideous."

Joyce laughs out loud next to him.

"I bet she loved it though, Hop."

He smiles, a small, shaky thing.

"God, she did. She really did." He clenches his jaw, blows out a breath through gritted teeth. He feels Joyce's small hands wrap around his own, lacing their fingers together and squeezing them. Her touch loosens the tightness in his chest.

"She would've stayed out there for hours looking at it, but I made us go inside as soon as it got dark. I didn't want her to get sick." He shakes his head. "I was the one who ended up getting sick -- caught the damn flu two days later. By the time I got better, the snow was too slushy to be anything but annoying."

He takes another deep breath in, lets it out slowly.

"It was early in spring when she got sick. By the time winter came around again..." He lifts one shoulder. "Well, you saw me."

Joyce looks up at him, her eyes brimming with affection and sympathy and sadness. She doesn't say anything, just lifts their intertwined fingers to her lips and presses a kiss against the back of his hand.

The movement is easy and honest, as though it's something they've done a hundred times rather than a moment of affection he feels like moves across this invisible barrier they've constructed. He tries not think about how natural it feels, how it soothes the hurt and longing

in his chest. Just focuses on the feel of her delicate fingers wrapped around his clumsy ones, the press of her body as she leans in against him. Somehow it feels like she's the one who's holding him up, even though he's a full foot taller than her, an easy hundred pounds heavier.

He sighs and closes his eyes. His heart feels scraped open and raw, but it doesn't hurt like it used to. He feels lighter, too -- like he's finally set down a heavy weight he didn't know he was carrying this whole time.

He looks down at their intertwined fingers, pressing the tips of his fingers into the soft ridges between her knuckles, before looking back up at her. She meets his gaze and for a moment, it seems like the rest of the world fades out behind him. He drops his gaze momentarily to her lips and --

The sound of an alarm clock pierces through the moment, startling their gaze away from one another. It cuts through the voices of the kids, though for a moment it serves only to make them even louder.

"Everybody shut up," Nancy says in a commanding voice, glowering at the yelling group of boys to the right of her, and suddenly everyone just...does.

Joyce chuckles, the heaviness between them dissipating in the cold January air.

"Looks like someone's been taking pointers from you," she says teasingly, looking over at him.

He huffs a laugh, though he can't help but be impressed.

"I should've taken her as a deputy in training rather than Steve," he mutters, grinning down at her when she leans into him and laughs.

"Mrs. Byers, Hopper," Nancy calls to them, "Are you ready?"

Joyce squeezes his hand tightly before letting go and walking down the steps. He stares after her, flexing his fingers, before he ambles down the steps after her.

Jonathan, Steve and Nancy make all the kids stand back by the porch, which he's grateful for. The last thing he wants is for a group of 14 year olds to follow his every step as he walks around pretending to judge their snowmen.

"So do we actually have to judge these?" He murmurs in a low tone to Joyce, who looks at him with fake indignance. He lifts his hands up in a 'what?' motion. "I mean, isn't it obvious?"

She tilts her head at him and crosses her arms in front of her.

"Hop," she warns, and he can't help the way warmth blooms in his chest at the way she's looking at him, fond and affectionate and exasperated all at once. "We need to take judging this snowman competition incredibly seriously," she says, though she can't quite hide the glimmer of laughter in his voice as she does.

He rolls his eyes -- a movement he's unfortunately picked up by being around a teenager so much -- but lets himself be led to the nearest snowman without further comment, Joyce's arm threaded through his.

Nancy, Jane and Max's snow woman is obviously the best, with its impressive detail and creativity. It actually looks like a person, for one, clothes and accessories carved into the snow and draped over the form. He glances over at the stack of tools the girls used -- a mixture of what looks to be pumpkin carving utensils and common household tools. He's honestly sad that it'll probably melt in the next few days, what with the weatherman predicting warmer temperatures for the end of the week.

They move onto Will, Mike and Jonathan's. It's more traditionally snowman shaped, but still obviously planned and well thought out. There's a snowy wizard's hat on top of its head, glow in the dark stars stuck to it, and a beard made of sticks that hangs over a dark blue robe. It's holding a large, gnarled staff in one hand that has a lantern hanging from the end. The other stick hand is facing straight out, thin branches coming out of the end that make it look like a hand splayed out. Attached to it is a bright blue glass ornament, like a burst of blue energy coming out from its hand.

They move onto the final entry from Steve, Lucas and Dustin, which is less of a single snowman and more of a scene of sorts, from what he can tell.

It's a group of snowmen gathered around a long, flat oval -- except that the snowmen (and snow women, he guesses, if the wigs are meant to be any indication of gender) are not so much even snow people as they are vaguely shaped lumps of snow with accessories draped over them.

He glances over at Joyce, who looks just about as confused as he feels.

"Alright kid - kids - explain this to me," he says, looking over at the group of teens to his left.

Steve scrubs a tired hand over his eyes while Lucas just looks away, embarrassed.

Dustin, however, looks exasperated at the both of them, as though it's their fault the snow scene has no discernible shape or purpose.

"It's us!" Dustin says, gesturing wildly to the lumps of snow in front of them as if that explains everything. "All of us -- at Thursday night dinner."

"What do you mean -- ." He stops, takes a closer look at the figure directly across from him.

He can't help it -- he throws his head back and laughs. Because now that Dustin's explained it, he actually has no problem figuring out who's supposed to be who.

There's a short figure with a blue and white hat on its head, sticks arms outstretched, rock outlined mouth open wide. It faces another snowman with stick arms also in the air, a camo banana wrapped around its head. Next to them is a snowman wearing an outrageous brunette wig, an l-shaped branch stuck to its side that makes it look like its rubbing its snowy temple.

At the very head of what he now realizes is meant to be a table is a figure with dirt smudged around the bottom half of his face -- a beard

he assumes -- his stone mouth a straight, disapproving line. Its arm sticks straight out, resting across the back of a smaller snowman wearing a green jacket, its stone mouth curling up in a smile.

He looks over at Joyce, who's staring at their snowy doppelgangers with a faint smile on her face, and nudges her with his elbow.

She glances up at him, her expression soft.

"Well," she says, grinning, "it certainly has a lot of personality."

He chuckles and nods, bringing out the ribbons from his coat pocket. He gestures between each individual one and the snowmen in turn. She nods at his suggestions, laughter in her eyes.

Together they award "best overall" to the snow woman, "most creative" to the wizard and "most personality" to the dinner scene.

The kids are solemn as Joyce announces the winners, each team cheering on the others. He can't imagine there can be any real surprises -- he'd basically known who was going to win the minute the kids all announced the teams. The kids must know it too, considering how little debate there is among them. At one point during the ribbon ceremony Dustin starts to speak up, but claps his mouth shut when he gets a look from Steve.

"Nice job, everyone," Joyce says, smiling widely at all the kids, "now go inside and warm up. Dinner should be ready in another fifteen minutes or so."

That breaks the polite mood among them, all the teens suddenly talking at once, moving up the stairs at once -- a wave of shouting and laughing and shoving that simultaneously makes his head hurt and his heart swell.

Only Jane lingers, coming over to him and reaching over to wrap his hand in her own.

"Are you ok?" Jane asks, looking up at him with those wide brown eyes, concern hovering at the edges. "You seem..." She wrinkles her forehead as she concentrates on finding just the right word. "You seem pensive," she finishes up, a flash of victory in her eyes that

makes him exceptionally proud.

He smiles down at her, running his hand over her hair and dropping a kiss into her hairline.

“Yeah, kid, I’m alright.” She looks at him a moment longer, considering his words, then throws her arms around him, squeezing him tight around his waist.

“I love you, dad,” she says quietly, her voice muffled against his coat.

He swallows thickly, pulling her close. He’s still struck, sometimes, by how extraordinary his life has become. Not because of monsters and alternate dimensions and lost children come back from the dead -- but because of moments like this. Moments he thought he’d lost forever, emotions he thought he’d never have again. So he lets himself relish the moment -- the simple sincerity with which she says it, the slim warmth of her against his chest.

“Love you, too, sweetheart,” he says, his voice gruff as he rubs his cheek into her wild mess of hair. He lets go and nudges her towards the house. “Now get inside and get warmed up. You’re freezing.”

She nods and walks quickly up the steps, the door banging shut behind her.

He turns around and walks over Joyce, who’s standing in the middle of the yard staring at the snowmen with a faint smile. He follows her gaze and finds that he can’t help the smile that creeps over his face, either.

She glances at him, shifts over until she’s standing directly in front of him. After a moment, she steps back into him as a shiver lances through her, the top of her head brushing up against his chin.

He hesitates, wanting and unsteady, his hands hanging awkwardly at his sides, but then another cold breeze sweeps over them and it feels only right to lean down and wrap his arms around her.

“Next year,” Joyce says, her voice soft and warm, “we can build our own snowman for the competition.”